

CHOLERA IN COLONIAL BENGAL: INTERROGATING BENGALI LITARATURE

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ABSTRACT

The diseases which are liable to create epidemic in colonial Bengal, cholera takes the formidable position. This contagious disease and effects of epidemic to the soldiers creates a bar to the company to implement a well-decorated administrative system. Water pollution was the key reason for braking out cholera epidemic. It became worse due to the lake of mass-awareness and inability to reduce water pollution. Naturally people started worshipping Ola-Bibi or Ola-Chandi to protect the mselves or to get rid of themselves from this fatal disease. At last the British government managed pure water as a result the paws of epidemic gradually weaken. The contemporary Bengali literature tried to portray the condition of colonial Bengal and the reaction of the mass.

KEYWORDS: Epidemic, Cholera, Black Death, Colonial Bengal, Water Pollution, Ola Bibi, Ola- Chandi, Bengali Literature

INTRODUCTION

Disease, ailments and the treatment got a high rank status while writing social history. Physical disorder is the part and parcel of one's life. Men succeeded in findings ways to overcome those ailments by developing various progressive techniques. In India, ailments and history of diseases and patients have always been arousing curiosity. Initially it was the Ayurveda on which people relied upon for their illness. Ayurveda played a vital role in treatment in vedic period. But during the middle age, with the invention of Muslim ruler, a new type of treatment called 'Unani' came into existence.

There were some important changes with the establishment of colonial rule in India in ways and processes of treatment. The reasons of those changes were emergence of Allopathic medicine, to use allopathic medicine as tools of empire, discovering of germs of disease etc. There was an imperialistic though behind this changes. The colonial ruler understood very well that these medicines would earn a good marketing value just like other 'England made' commercial goods. Actually the problems of soldiers made the British to think about the treatment processes.

Let us take epidemic e cholera as a discussion topic in this context. During the epidemic in Bengal, cholera made many to suffer and even caused death. We come to know about this dangerous fact in Tarasankar's writing. He wore, "It was a bloodcurdling situation at this time. Villages are being affected one by one. Just like fire spreads in hay so as this malady expanded throughout the village."¹

In Bengal during the period 1817-31 almost 18 million among the civilians and soldiers lost their lives due to cholera.² In 1820 according to James Jameson's calculation completely ten thousand people died in each district of Bengal.³ In the year 1817 ten thousand died in cholera in Jashore within two month.⁴ This sudden attack of cholera acted

as a rodent in the lives of the British. They were mainly afraid of this Black Death in their imagination. The amounts of death among the Britishers were very negligible. They lived in neat and clean areas there foods were nutritious, healthy and hygienic. The officers of the Govt. health department accept the fact that the natives were affected by cholera due to malnutrition, filthiness and poverty.

There were various reasons behind the enhancement of cholera in colonial Bengal. Unhygienic and dirty water usage was the main cause for choleras. We notice this in Sarat Chandra's writing. "There's no river, few ponds which were usable initially cannot be utilized now due to lack of reformation. Still nobody was bothered. The villagers believed there was no need to worry till they had the capability to obviate their thirst and hunger."⁵ Regarding this health issue it was written in a contemporary article. "Dr. K. Macleod, a former doctor of Calcutta wrote in his report in 1883-84 that all the wells and ponds of Calcutta are being shut and it will be continued until the people don't stop themselves from using these water. The readers know very well that these wells and ponds are causing the outbreak of cholera."⁶ In this article different causes of water pollution have been instructed. The polluted drain water, excrement and excremental germs mixes with the pond water. The house holders utilize that pond water in their various activities. Even they drink that water and blend it with drinkable milk. Naturally this polluted water acts as a carrier of cholera germs".⁶ The article also written about the pollution of the Ganges water. "There are innumerable boats and ships in the Ganga of Calcutta. The men of in the and ships excrete in water. Those excreta float on the bank of rivers (where there are less waves). People of Calcutta take bath in the same water, wash their face and even carried that water in a vassel"⁷ Regarding the cause of water pollution in cities, it is said that different leaves and entire plants fall into the ponds and gets decomposed. Besides, the domestic wastage and experimental water mix with the pond water. This polluted water is used in bathing and cooking.⁸ Rural superstitions made it more horrifying. The superstitious people in the village believed that according to the scripture the water of an established pond can never get polluted. We can see it in Sarat Chandra's writing ." Brindavan replied, ' this pond is the only pond of this village has, I shall not let it spoil during this tragic period ' Mr. Ghoshal said in anger, ' This is your wrong insist Brindavan , according to scripture, pond water can never get spoiled or unholy. You may read English but how can you disbelieve the scripture?"⁹

However the British Government cannot forgot their responsibility during the time of epidemic. David Arnold accepted it. He wrote that Cholera increased two times in the villages. It was only Cholera that made many people to die. But Cholera became four times dangerous in addition with famine.¹⁰ During the 2nd half of the 19th century due to joint attack of famine and Cholera people helplessly accepted death.

This death causing Cholera epidemic compelled people to take the shelter of Gods. From the writing of Tarashankar, we come to know that cholera roused panic and fear among the people. "Everywhere there is rumor. Dangerous rumors it is like the primitive ages. Cholera can be seen! It is roaming from village to its interior. It is visible during the evening It is a girl having then poorly physique, fiery eyes, rough hair; she wears damp ragged cloth, takes thatched mattress below her arms and arrives villages taking the side road. She takes the fragrance of the villages all the way to the crematorium. She enters in the evening and the on who sees her first becomes unfortunate enough to get affected in cholera and then dies.

After that disease spreads house to house, locality to locality. In the midnights the street-dogs bark usually. It is barking now for a long period of time. There is an underling meaning in its barking. There is no anger in its shouts, but a

fear. These dogs can see the rough haired girl roaming in the streets. They shout fearfully. All those who are half-asleep startle in terror.”¹¹

To prevent oneself from this terror, people started worshipping ‘Ola- Bibi’ or ‘Ola- Chandi’. Along with this many religious rites and rituals were carried on. “Every evening he used to take carols with him and roamed road to road. He believed this glorification will keep unpropitiousness away. The drunkards in every village made poojas of ‘Raksha kali’. They had a strong belief.”¹²

The tutelary goddess for cholera was Ola chandi or ola Bibi, when cholera arises as an epidemic, people in hamlets perform worship of Ola-Chandi. On Saturdays and Tuesday days, this worship takes place magnificently under the leadership of the foreman. This worship prevailed in Nadia District. Though she is worshipped in all over Bengal irrespective of religious distinctions. Aliments removed discriminations among the people. What was Ola-Chandi for the Hindus, was Ola-Bibi for the Muslims. The Hindus visited the Mausoleum of Ola -Bibi to get rid of cholera. Race and region were never an obstacle in the Joint prayer of so vast a people in Bengal: In south India the collateral Goddess of Ola- Bibi was ‘Mariamma’, ‘Ankamma’ and in Orissa, it was Jogini Devi. These are all the different avtaars of the cholera-deity. But in some places because of some rural conflict and pride for religion made exceptions. We find an indication in Saratchanda’s writing.

The following quotation is relevant of the fact. “ After few hours Brindavan emotionally held doctor Gopal’s legs in his sitting room and said, “ please save the child doctor. Howmucheever my fault may be, the child is innocent. It is a baby, doctor lay your feet dust just for once, see him at least for once ! You will pity his sufferings. Gopal replied “ didn’t you remember that uncle mukherjee is the maternal uncle of this doctor ? you, a cretin insulted a Brahmin! Didn’t you realize that time you have to be at this fit one day? A couple of clothes if washed in that big pond, it will spoil the water! Am I so tender a child ? this is nothing, but arrogance of money. This happens when people like you get financial power. How can you just stop people from using the bank? What desperando? What vainglory ! go, go! I wouldn’t visit your house.”¹³

However measures taken for purified water decreased the outbreak of cholera in many areas. From 1869 people started using time calls in Calcutta. This led to set water –pipes in main lanes and roads of the city. the number of those roads were 360. During the end of 1860, 1168 houses were facilitated with time calls/tube wells in 1872 the number increased to 5874 in 1875 it became 8970 and in 1877 it went upto 10871 houses.¹⁴

Regarding the health issue it was written in an article that time, “In 1871-72 that disease made its devastating appearance. But the number of death less in Calcutta this two years. This leads to the fact that the time call water helped reduce cholera”¹⁵ we also find this type of incident in sarat’s writing. “That day brindavan decided to dig a well but he thought on was not enough. The east side of the village consisted of wretched people. another well is necessary to prevent crisis of water as well as ailments. So he consulted with the sahib of keshab farm and brought news that a well dug with such an expenditure will not only serve one village it will serve five to six villages. Besides it can be a great help for cultivation parallelly. Brindavan agreed with him happily and for that purpose he registered his entire property except the temporal one, to keshav and said ‘keshav do the same brother so that no travelling friend of mile dies drinking the poisonous water.”¹⁶

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